

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
Middlebury, Vermont

HABS No. VT-11

HABS
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Vermont

Historic American Buildings Survey
Arthur H. Smith, District Officer
Gryphon Bldg., Rutland, Vt.

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
Middlebury, Addison County, Vermont

<u>Owner</u>	Congregational Society of Middlebury
<u>Date of Erection</u>	1806-1809
<u>Builder</u>	Gamaliel Painter
<u>Architect</u>	Lavius Fillmore
<u>Present Condition</u>	This building is in very good condition at the present. Palladian window in rear of Church not original. Pulpit was originally very high, but in 1835 it was lowered four feet and the gallery also lowered so as not to obstruct the view of the preacher from the rear seats. In 1854 more alterations were made, the floor was raised two feet and the gallery front lowered by inches and pulpit remodeled.
<u>Number of stories</u>	Two
<u>Materials of Construction</u>	Foundation - Stone with concrete face. Floors - Entrance Maple wood, inside soft pine. Exterior walls - wood (clapboarded) Interior walls - lath and plaster Roof - slate
<u>Other existing records</u>	Pamphlet written by Miss Susan Archibald, entitled, "History of the Congregational Church of Middlebury, Vt. Written about 1913. Pilgrim Press of Boston were the publishers.

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
Middlebury, VermontDescriptive Data

Two leading maxims of the philosophy of history are that the effects of an event are unending and that history repeats itself. Both are illustrated in the story of the Congregational Meeting House of Middlebury, probably the most wonderful and surprising building in the state, -wonderful because like all truly beautiful objects, it affords fresh pleasure and reveals new perfections to the beholder the longer and the closer he looks upon it; -surprising because it is the original house of worship erected in Middlebury, a temple of God in the form of highest art, yet erected by the first settlers of the town from timbers felled in nearby forests primeval. There are beautiful churches and temples in all lands, but where save here was one of such beauty erected by those who cleared the land and suffered all the privations of a new country?

It is often asked "Why did the settlers of Middlebury happen to do this wonderful work while all other towns were content with primitive first structure?" The answer given by Middlebury's historians, Merrill, Swift and Brainerd, is that it all came about as the result of a mistake and the presence of the falls of the Otter Creek at the west edge of Middlebury as it was at first. The mistake was that on a resurvey it was found that Gamaliel Painter's pitch was over the town line in Salisbury; so with a true sense of fairness the proprietors allowed him to repitch, which he did with fine judgment next to the falls. With the help of an adjacent pitch,

he became the owner of one hundred acres of the present east side of the village extending as far north as Seminary Street. In chartering the Vermont towns it was always planned that the villages should be in the center, where they actually are in Bridport, Addison, Shoreham and Orwell. Accordingly Daniel Foot, occupying what is now the Bienvenu Farm on Foote Street, expected the village to grow up about him where he and his sons had prepared for the expected boom by securing nine hundred acres. But although Painter had pitched his one hundred acres in pine forest so dense that men became lost in attempting to pass through it, the settlement about his grist mill and saw mill at the Falls kept growing. Painter, with all the wisdom of a modern city planner, deeded parks to the County and Village, obtained the removal of the County Seat from West Addison to the park he had deeded to the county and promoted the location on the west side of the Falls of the County Grammar School and the College. Each of these wise acts drew settlers to his village, happily settlers from Connecticut of superior quality and schooling. But the committee appointed by the town in 1790, "to fix a place to set the meeting-house" had reported, after a year and a half of deliberation three to two in favor of a site just north of the present cemetery in Foote Street. The two who dissented were Gamaliel Painter and his brother-in-law John Chipman. Church services were then being held in Daniel Foot's barn. Foot offered to erect the meeting house at his own expense. Although in the minority, Painter succeeded in staving off the action and outgeneraled Foot, who made the mistake of refusing

further use of his barn. After that church services were soon held in the present village, first at the tavern, then occupying the site of the present Addison House. After the erection of the Court House in 1798, the services were held in it until the erection of the meeting house.

As a result of this rivalry of villages and of these two men, the erection of the meeting house was providentially delayed from 1790 to 1806, almost sixteen years. Several sites were selected and abandoned before the present commanding one was purchased. Meanwhile the law was being changed so that support of the meeting house and minister, which had been a matter of public taxation, became voluntary. Most of the cost of the church was met by a public sale of the pews; Painter was given charge of the work. He engaged Lavius Fillmore, an Albany architect, who had the year before built the present meeting house at Old Bennington. After such a struggle and such a victory, we can readily understand that Painter and the extraordinarily cultured colony the college had brought to his settlement should desire the architect to spare nothing in art or cost in designing the finest meeting house in New England. Middlebury then promised to become the seat of the largest population in the new state. This distinction she soon after attained, although she did not long hold it.

The distinguished authority on architecture, Aymer Embury II, ascribes the Bennington church to the famous Massachusetts architect, Asher Benjamin, in Embury's book Early American

Churches, which is in the College Library. Miss Susan Parker wrote Mr. Embury and called to his attention that this was in fact the work of Lavius Fillmore. Embury replied that Fillmore may have been the builder, but that the Bennington Meeting House showed plainly the style and influence of Benjamin's work. If this be so, Fillmore can still claim the glory of the wonderful tower he added to the Middlebury church, which is said to resemble the tower of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, near London.

The edifice was three years in building and is said to have cost \$9,000.00. This shows how the value of a dollar has depreciated in a century, for the same building would cost fully ten times that sum to reproduce today, while the framework of huge timbers could not now be obtained it is probable that the cost would have been even more then, had not the members of the parish generously given their timber and skilled labor without charge.

"THE CHANGES"

At the end of a century, the need of renovating and restoring the exterior and the main auditorium to their original beauty of properly heating the whole building, and of modernizing the basement, became obvious; but as with the beginning of the meeting house, these improvements were providentially delayed for 16 years or longer, until the delay had rendered the need so much the greater that it compelled action on a much larger scale than had been contemplated.

As at the beginning, the work was entrusted to the best available

architects, Messrs. Harding and Seaver of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, specialists in post-colonial reproduction. Mr. Harding died before the plans were drawn, but not until after he had studied the edifice and advised the committee. His partner, Mr. Seaver, has faithfully completed the work with rare patience and modesty. It is doubtless more difficult to restore another artist's work than to design a new building.

As Gamaliel Painter led in the erection of the building, so his descendants have been the most enthusiastic supporters of the restoration. Particularly is true of Mrs. Flora Kitchell of Orlando, Fla., who made the initial contribution to the fund, forcing the society to action, and provided the cost of the mullion paned windows of amber cathedral glass. The panes are like the original ones, which however, were of plain glass. The church was originally without blinds. Of late years the blinds have been kept closed to subdue the light. This is now accomplished by the amber glass and the blinds are left open. They have been removed entirely from the facade and lunette windows. One of the principal discoveries has been that of the lunette over the central door, evidently intended by its designer as one of his special touches of adornment to the building, but lost to recent generations by the superimposed sunburst of blinds.

The walls of the interior of the church are murescoed in a warm grey, mixed to order to correspond with the selection of the architect. There is no stenciling. This plainness of color accentuates and brings out the beauty of the dome and of the groined arches so strikingly that old parishoners have exclaimed

that the groined arches were new.

Sometime in the remote past, the palladian window back of the pulpit was closed and plastered over, the blinds being left to show its former location. On chiseling into the plastering, the original window frame was found. Mr. Seaver has designed a new paneling back of the pulpit with Ionic pilasters properly setting off the restored window, which from its harmony with the architecture of the rest of the auditorium, we may well believe a close reproduction of the original by Fillmore.

In the lobby, a vestibule entrance has been built, the stairs to the main auditorium made easier, the platform at the head of them widened, the location of the stairway to the basement changed and a new staircase built, and the sides of the lobby beautified by four arches in new partitions in line with the bottom step of the staircases to the gallereries. One of these partitions provides a coat room. The lobby floor is laid with linoleum, the stairs with rubber matting.

One of the four main columns supporting the roof was found so eaten by dry rot that no service were allowed after the discovery until this weakness in the column could be remedied which for a long time was a puzzle how to accomplish without much damage to the vaulted ceilings.

Important previous alterations in the church occurred in 1835 and 1854. The Register recently called attention to the installation of the beautiful ornamental lamps at the front entrance thirty-five years ago.

All the information given in this history thus far was obtained from a pamphlet entitled, "The Meeting House of the Church of Christ", (now called Congregational Church). This pamphlet was written by, Mr. Charles I. Button a Middlebury attorney. He wrote this in 1925.

"ADDITIONAL HISTORY FROM ANOTHER SOURCE"

Mr. John Barnet was made the first pastor of Middlebury when the services were held in a barn June 15, 1790. This barn where the services were held was some where near where the present church now stands.

The first bell was placed in the tower of the church in 1821. This bell was cracked and was replaced by the present one in 1841.

Many competent critics have praised the beautiful proportions shown in the steeple of the church edifice and the wonderful grace and symmetry in the ceiling of the audience room. The central dome the large cross and the groined arches and the four graceful Ionic columns that support them.

This above information was secured from a pamphlet entitled, "History of the Congregational Church of Middlebury, Vt.", compiled by, Miss Susan E. Archibald, Church Historian in 1913. This pamphlet was published by the Pilgrim Press of Boston about 1913.

Approved: Arthur H. Smith
District Officer

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ADDENDUM TO
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
Main & Seymour Streets
Middlebury
Addison County
Vermont

HABS No. VT-11

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